

WHO ARE THE MAGI ?

By Late Ervad Phiroze S. Masani

The term 'Magi' is the English or rather Latin plural of 'Magus' derived from **Magnus** great. It is the literal rendering of **Magus** in Persian which is a translation of the Avestic '**Magavan**' from '**Maz**' greatness, meaning 'Sublime personage', or a 'person par excellence' or more literally a 'protector of moral and Spiritual greatness'. The Pahlavi renderings are sometimes "**Magih**" meaning Spiritual and moral excellence or Sublimity and sometimes "**Magopat**" i. e., master of divine exaltation, which has given the Persian word "**Mopat**" or "**Mobed**". Just as the Avestan word '**Athravan**' means "protector of the Spiritual Fire" or another Avestic term "**Aethra-paiti**" means "Master of the Spiritual Fire", for which the Pahlavi gives "**Asrun**" or "**Aerpat**" which has been corrupted into Persian "**Ervad**", in the same way "**Magavan**" or "**Magopat**" or "**Maga**" refers to the high class of priests who **used to** preserve their Spiritual Worth and Greatness by a practical life of purity.

The regimen of the Magi or Magavan is quiet in keeping with the mandates of Zoroastrian religion.

The exhibition of Spiritual powers by any person is in proportion to the degree of holiness observed by him in every day life. The Magavan being an extra-ordinary class in point of observance of holiness is able to possess a high degree of

Spiritual powers. Although an ordinary follower of the Zoroastrian religion is allowed to live on a vegetable diet free of animal flesh in accordance with the rules of Ashoi-principle, the Magavan who belongs to a higher order of Aura has to live merely on fruit and milk. Hence we see that the Magavan belongs to the priestly order with has reached the highest degree of Zoroastrian purity. The principle of marriage is enjoined on every ordinary follower of the Zoroastrian religion, but an exception is made only in the case of the Magavan who remains calibate. Even the entire priestly class excepting the Magavan has to live a married life, because the institution of marriage as pointed out in the Vendidad is based on an unseen law of nature termed "**Khætvadatha**" in the Avesta for the unfoldment of the Soul. The Magavan having attained perfection in this line of progress remains celibate also in accordance with the exception made by the Zoroastrian teachings.

All the so-called salient features of the beliefs and practices of the Magi are originally Zoroastrian tenets. The reverence for elements, fire, air, water and earth taught in all the Avesta, even in the Gathas, is specially treated in the Vendidad which is taken from the Javit-shida-dad Nask. The entire Vendidad is teeming with injunctions for a Zoroastrian to observe the Law of Economy of nature by keeping everything in nature pure.

There is also at times, a reference to the disposal of the dead by exposure to sunlight and birds of prey, and this practice some writers say was not Persian but Magian. The historian has taken a somersault when he believes that the Persians of the Achaemenian times used to bury their corpses, and most writers have blindly followed this belief. After the advent of Zoroaster the system of exposing corpses in open wells termed 'Dokhmas' built on high hills, to sunlight and vultures was introduced. Before the time of Zoroaster also there was no system of tombs for the interment of corpses, but there was a special system of preserving the bones after the corpses were devoured by animals and birds of prey, and this system was known as that of "Asto-dana" literally, receptacle for bones. If the historical fact of there being tombs of Persian Kings in Achaemenian times is at all true which we have reasons to doubt, it can only point to the Asto-danas which may have continued as a relic of a pre-Zoroastrian practice. Asto-dana must not be confounded with interment or burial, and this confusion has been made by the historian who is followed by all other writers.

In order to have a proper idea of the world of confusion arising for the understanding of the term Magi we shall give some views from some well-known western writers.

In the book entitled "The Age of the Avesta and Zoroaster" originally in German written by Dr. Geiger and Dr. Spiegel, and translated by Dastur Darab Peshotan Sanjana, it is said that :-

(a) "All that we know about Magi allows us to assert that their doctrines and their customs were perfectly identical with those which we find recorded in Avesta.

(b) "Khosru Parviz in a proclamation given in the Dinkard says - "that Vishtaspa caused all the works written 'in the language of the Magi to be collected in order to acquire the knowledge of the Mazdian law.' We cannot attach much value to the statement that Khosru Parviz characterizes the Avesta language as the language of the Magi. There is no doubt that the Magi were the representatives of the Zoroastrian priesthood. If then the Magi alone still understood the Avesta language, if they used it in their daily ceremonies, prayers, and recitations, and if it completely swayed the Cult upheld by the Magi, it might well be called, for the sake of convenience, the language of the Magi, Consequently it is characterized as the language of the single order, not as that of a nation."

(c) "The Zoroastrian religion is represented in historical times by the Median Magi, through whose influence it strove to gain ground among the majority of the Persians under the Sovereignty of the Achaemenidae. But hence it has been inferred only of late, that the Magi composed the Avesta known to us, and that Zarathushtra himself was a Magus. This is only one of the three possibilities. Besides this there are two other credible suppositions :-

(1) The Magi adopted the doctrine of the Zoroastrian priests, thus representing

a later phase in the development of the Avesta religion. (2) The Zoroastrian priests are the heirs of the Magi.

(d) "As regards Prof. Harlez's theory that the Avesta was composed by the Magi and in Media, a very important fact seems to contradict it. The Avesta priests are not strictly called "Maghu" but "Athravans". In all the passages where the priests are mentioned, they invariably bear this name. Their testimony would lead us to infer that "Athravan", and in fact this title exclusively, served as the official designation of the priesthood. Why then should the Magi in their own writings have given to themselves any name then that by which they were universally known to the world? Now in a passage in the Avesta (Yacna Lxv; 6) there indeed occurs the expression "Moghu-tbish" and this must be taken into consideration. But what does it prove? At the very most, only this, that at the time when this passage was composed, the term Maghu was not unknown and perhaps was almost synonymous with Athravan. Moreover it seems quite possible, that in the passage referred to, Maghu bears a purely generic meaning. We must of course admit that the context does not compel us to adopt the rendering of the "priest" for Maghu, which is possible, though not exclusively appropriate. The Avesta, therefore, does not recognize the term Maghu as the title of the Zoroastrian priests; it never designates them by any other name than that of Athravane. The Avesta speaks only of the Athravans and not of the Magi. The Avesta civilisation dates from a very remote antiquity. It is fruitless to

specify a particular century. But it is no doubt that it is older than Medo-Persian history."

Then there is another great writer Martin Haug who has his say in the book of "the Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings and Religion of the Parsis" as under :—

(e) "To the whole world Zoroaster's love was best known by the name of the doctrine of the Magi, which denomination was commonly applied to the priests of India, Persia and Babylonia. The earliest mention of them is made by the Prophet Jeremiah who enumerated among the retinue of King Nebuchadnezzar at his entry into Jerusalem, "the Chief of the Magi" from which statement we may distinctly gather that the Magi exercised a great influence at the court of Babylonia. The Persians, however, whose priests the Magi appear to have been, are never spoken of as adherents to idolatry."

(f) "King Cyrus professed the religion of the Magi. The Zoroastrian religion exhibits even a very close affinity to, or rather identifies with, several important doctrines of the Mosaic religion and Christianity, such as the personality and attributes of the devil, and the resurrection of the dead, which are both ascribed to the religion of the Magi, and are really to be found in the present scriptures of the Parsis."

(g) "The name Magi occurs even in the New Testament. In the Gospel, according to St. Matthew, the Magi (Greek Magoi, translated in the English Bible by "wise men") came from the

East to Jerusalem to worship the newborn child Jesus at Bethlehem. That these Magi were the priests of the Zoroastrian religion, we know from Greek writers. The books of all these writers being lost, save some fragments preserved by later authors, such as Plutarch, Diogenes of Laertes, and Pliny, we cannot judge how far they were acquainted with the religion of the Magi. The two chief sources whence the Greeks and Romans derived information about the religion of the Magi were Theopompos's eight book of the history of King Philip of Macedonia, which was entitled "On Miraculous Things" and specially treated of the doctrine of the Magi: and Hermippos, who wrote a separate book "On

the Magi". We are left without information whether or not Theopompos desired his statements on the love of the Magi from the intercourse with the Persian priests themselves; but Hermippos, who composed, besides his works on the Zoroastrian doctrine, biographies of law givers, the Seven Sages of Greece, &c, is reported by Pliny to have made very laborious investigations in all the Zoroastrian books, which were said to comprise two millions of verses, and to have stated the contents of each book separately. He therefore really seems to have had some knowledge of the sacred language and texts of the Magi, for which reason the loss of his work is greatly to be regretted."

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